THE STARFISH AND THE SPIDER

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Book Review: What I Learned from the Starfish and the Spider

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The Starfish and The Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations is about how the internet gave life to new business opportunities. The book highlights great examples of long-established, traditional companies that failed to prepare for the changes the internet would pose to their bottom lines. I have always thought of the Army as a business, so as I read *The Starfish and the Spider*, I did so from the perspective of a Soldier.

The authors, Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom, both successful entrepreneurs in business, government and nonprofit sectors teamed up to write the book. In it, they highlight three types of organizations: centralized, decentralized and a hybrid of the two. These three types of organizations give the book its name. Centralized companies are like spiders. A spider has eight legs and a head; cut off the spider's head or legs, and its body will die. Decentralized and hybrid organizations are more like starfish, which can regrow lost limbs. Starfish, like open organizations, have a flat structures. The organs of a starfish are spread across its body, allowing the animal not only to survive severed limbs, but to regrow them.[1]

Centralized organizations are typical, fixed- or closed-structure organizations such as AT&T or Walmart. They have a hierarchy, and communicate from the top down. There may be some bottom-up communication happening at the lower levels, but those communications generally never reach the executive level. Centralized companies were the first in, pre-internet giants who established market dominance.

Decentralized, or open organizations and their effect on centralized businesses is what is highlighted in the

book. Decentralized organizations were spawned from the Internet's ability to allow everyone with a computer and online access to buy, sell, and share information and ideas for little to no cost.[2] Many times a decentralized organization may not be an organization at all, but rather an ideology. Terrorist organizations are an example of this style of organization.

Finally, there are hybrid organizations which have figured out how to have a centralized structure with open or decentralized functions. One of the best examples of a hybrid organization according to the authors is eBay. eBay allows users to sell items directly to one another, user-to-user. Also, eBay empowered its community with the introduction of user reviews, allowing the community to police itself while building trust. eBay hosts the user-to-user interactions, but the user-rating system is decentralized, making eBay a hybrid organization.[3]

If asked, most people would probably say the Army is a centralized organization. It has a hierarchal fixed structure, but there are some things that, in my opinion, make our Army a hybrid organization.

First, while we have a hierarchy, we also distribute leadership across the formation. Each unit has a commander, and every Soldier, at every level, has a role. Second, the ideology of freedom fuels our all-volunteer force. The third and final reason we are a hybrid organization, is mission command.

According to Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, Mission Command, operations require responsibility and decision-making at the point of action. Through mission command, commanders initiate and integrate all military functions and actions to accomplish the mission. As unexpected opportunities and threats present themselves, commanders at all levels are guided by the six principles of mission command: Build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander's intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders and accept prudent risk.[4]

There is probably no better example of a decentralized organization than ISIS. Founded on an ideology, ISIS uses the power of the internet to attract followers or small circles globally. They are completely decentralized. When measuring a decentralized network, Brafman and Beckstrom say it is better "to be vaguely right than precisely wrong."[5] ISIS, like many other decentralized organizations, eventually focused on something tangible: the Caliphate. This land-grab led to centralization and, ultimately, the losses they suffered.

How the Army seizes, retains and exploits the initiative to gain and maintain an advantage in sustained land operations will be challenged by the most basic technology in the future. Compare what Napster did to the music industry. Peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing offered by Napster was a threat the record labels were not prepared to counter. The record labels treated P2P like a centralized threat, chasing it around attempting to cut off its head.

Brafman and Beckstrom also discuss how to defeat decentralized organizations such as Napster. For many years, record labels and movie studios levied lawsuit after lawsuit against Napster and other P2P sites, which seemed to only fuel piracy. Pursuing justice in the courtroom may be great for dealing with centralized organizations, but it is the wrong approach for a decentralized organization.[6] Unfortunately, we take that approach with terrorism, chasing it around and trying to chop of its head.

Going forward, the Army must continue to counter decentralized threats and decentralize its own functions. The end of ISIS is not the end of terrorism or state-funded armies, so the Army must posture itself and its resources to best prepare for both. The internet has had a profound effect on convention. Decentralization has helped our Army retain its competitive advantage. However the internet has provided cheap and instant access to knowledge that has degraded our technological advantages and created new threats. We must continue to seek and pursue what the book calls the "sweet spot."[7] We cannot sit back and rest on our laurels, we must remain adaptable.

The Starfish and the Spider is one of the best books I have read, it really opened my eyes. Not only on how the internet gave rise to the peer-to-peer movement, but how distributed leadership and mission command have made the U.S. Army so successful. It also led me to think about our reliance on technology and web-based capabilities. It made me consider how the Army would respond with an adversary who uses technology against us. A future near-peer conflict may require us to operate without technology to be successful. The Starfish and the Spider is an absolute must read, and if you read it I promise your perspective on leadership, technology, terrorism and even Security Force Assistance Brigades will be a little clearer. ∎

Notes

1. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. New York: Penguin Group.

2. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. New York: Penguin Group.

3. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. New York: Penguin Group.

4. Headquarters, Department of the Army. 2012. Mission Command ADRP 6-0. Washington D.C.: Department of the Army (pp.1)

5. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organiza-

tions. New York: Penguin Group.

6. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. New York: Penguin Group.

7. Ori Brafman, Rod. A. Beckstrom. 2006. The Starfish and the Spider the unstoppable power of leaderless organizations. New York: Penguin Group.

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